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Bill would allow suits by World War II POW's forced to labor

By [Angel Wilson](#) /Cox News Service
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WASHINGTON -- American GIs forced to labor for their Japanese captors in World War II should have the right to sue for reparations, members of Congress argued Wednesday.

The State Department is keeping the former prisoners of war from suing Japanese companies because of its interpretation of a peace treaty the two nations signed in 1951, Reps. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., and Mike Honda, D-Calif., said at a news conference and at a House hearing.

The two have sponsored a bill, the Justice for United States Prisoners of War Act of 2001, that would allow the POWs to sue.

The bill is not aimed at Japanese citizens, Rohrabacher said at a press conference before the hearing. "We are, in fact, directing most of our anger to the U.S. government."

"The Communist Chinese government is pursuing justice for its citizens," Rohrabacher said. "However, the United States government has refused to support similar claims by survivors of Corregidor and the Bataan Death March."

The veterans, Honda said, "defended the very system they're fighting today."

Some of the main supporters of the bill are survivors of the Bataan Death March, U.S. soldiers who were marched for days through the Philippine jungles after being captured in April 1942.

For those who survived, the next few years were a fight for life. Many were forced into slave labor by private Japanese companies, including Mitsui Mining and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

Dr. Lester Tenney, one of the survivors, can still remember the march and the coal mine he had to work in.

"In my case, I was forced to work in a coal mine owned by the industrial giant, Mitsui, who allotted me 500 calories of rice each

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day, and medical care was practically nonexistent," he said at the news conference.

Tenney worked an average of 12 hours a day, 28 days a month. Civilians who worked for the company would also beat the POWs on a regular basis. "My back and shoulder were broken, my teeth knocked out, my nose and head split wide open," Tenney said. When he was finally released, he weighed 97 pounds.

Tenney, now in his early 80s, is one of the younger POWs left, and he wants something done before all of the World War II POWs die off. "I'm not seeking sympathy, nor any glory. I'm just seeking justice," he said.

"We, the defenders of Bataan and Corregidor, were sacrificed once," Tenney said in a statement to the subcommittee. "We should not be sacrificed again. The first was understandable. The second is unconscionable."

While the U.S. government has given compensation to all POWs, Honda and Rohrabacher do not believe that \$890 back in 1948 makes up for their suffering.

One of the most disturbing factors for Rohrabacher is that there has never been any formal apology from any of the Japanese companies. That, he said, is what many of the POWs would like more than anything.

"It's not right to pretend it didn't happen," he said.

Angel Wilson is a Washington correspondent for the Palm Beach Post.

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